

What happens next?

After RJP confirms interest on behalf of the victim/survivor, it contacts the offender to assess him or her for possible participation. This assessment examines a variety of criteria, such as acceptance of responsibility for the offense, level of remorse, awareness of the impact of the offense on the victim/survivor and/or community, and general attitude about contact with the victim/survivor.

RJP then contacts the victim/survivor to inform him or her of the assessment of the offender.

RJP will then provide the victim/survivor with additional information about the process if he or she is still interested in participating.

When does the dialogue take place?

The RJP director and a student intern communicate with both parties separately as many times as necessary for sufficient preparation. Once both sides are ready, the dialogue will take place, usually in the Wisconsin prison where the offender is located.

Restorative Justice Project

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For a listing of additional resources and services for victim/survivors in Wisconsin, please visit our webpage.

Victim-Offender Dialogue is a service of the Frank J. Remington Center's Restorative Justice Project at the University of Wisconsin Law School.

Victim-Offender Dialogue

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What is the Restorative Justice approach?

Victim-Offender Dialogue is one component of the broader restorative justice philosophy. Restorative justice takes an approach to crime that seeks to help victims/survivors move forward, hold offenders accountable for their behavior, and provide a meaningful opportunity for both victim/survivor and community involvement in the criminal justice system.

What is Victim-Offender Dialogue?

Victim-Offender Dialogue is a process that allows a victim/survivor and an offender to meet in a safe and structured setting, with a trained facilitator and a student intern, to discuss the circumstances and impact of an offense. The focus is on the harm that has been done and the offender's responsibility for the crime.

How does the process start?

Victim-Offender Dialogue is victim/survivor initiated. The victim/survivor may contact the Restorative Justice Project directly or be referred to RJP by the Department of Corrections Office of Victim Services and Programs.

Victim-Offender Dialogue is victim/survivor focused, while being offender sensitive.



The Restorative Justice Project engages in victim/survivor initiated dialogue requests with offenders, typically in sensitive crimes and crimes of severe violence.





The restorative process focuses on meeting victim/survivor needs and achieving offender accountability; the results can be transformative for all parties involved.

Participation

Why would a victim choose to participate?

Victim-Offender Dialogue lets a victim/survivor participate directly, and in a very human way, in the criminal justice system. Victims/survivors may choose to participate for a number of reasons, including:

- Victims/survivors often have questions about the crime that only the offender can answer: “Why did you pick me/my loved one?” “What were my loved one’s last words?” “What actually happened before, during, and after the crime?”
- Victims/survivors frequently want to know what kind of person the offender is, whether he or she is sorry, and what the offender’s life is like inside the prison.
- Victims/survivors may want an opportunity to explain how the crime has impacted their lives and their families, to discuss steps the offender can take to help address the harm that he or she has caused, and to express their thoughts and feelings about the crime.

Why would an offender choose to participate?

Some offenders want to apologize to their victims/survivors and to express remorse for the crimes that they committed. Answering questions honestly and providing the desired details about an offense can be a way for an offender to take responsibility for the harm that he or she has caused. Participation may also be a starting point of an offender’s attempt to make amends.



Director Jonathan Scharrer and Restorative Justice Project student prepare for an upcoming Victim-Offender Dialogue.

Is participation voluntary?

Yes, participation of both victim/survivor and offender is completely voluntary. Either party can end his or her involvement at any time. Under no circumstances is either the victim/survivor or the offender compelled or pressured to participate.

Program Principles

- The key participant in the process is the victim/survivor, but the process is also offender sensitive.
- Victim-Offender Dialogue should be available at whatever point in the criminal justice process a victim/survivor wants to participate. It doesn’t matter whether it is 8 months or 18 years after an offense.
- Participation by victims/survivors and offenders is entirely voluntary throughout.
- There is no anticipated outcome for dialogue sessions and no result is predetermined. Rather, participants determine a resolution, consistent with the guidelines of the process.
- In addition to direct face-to-face meetings between the victim/survivor and offender, Victim-Offender Dialogue can occur through letters, teleconferences, or video conferences.
- RJP typically works with either the direct victim/survivor of a crime or a family member of a homicide victim and can pursue a dialogue meeting with the offender directly involved or with an offender who committed a similar crime.



Under the supervision of the project director, students help guide victim/survivors and offenders through the intensive preparation process culminating in one or more face-to-face meetings.



As part of the preparation process, the director and student facilitator take questions and answers back and forth between the participants.

Why is Victim-Offender Dialogue important?

Victim-Offender Dialogue provides an opportunity for victims/survivors to participate in the criminal justice system in a way that may be more meaningful than other options available to them. The Victim-Offender Dialogue process gives victims/survivors and their family members a voice in a way that they may have been denied in the traditional criminal justice system.

Victims/survivors occasionally have a strong desire to engage with people who have offended against them. RJP strives to facilitate this contact in a productive and healing manner.

Offenders often perceive their offenses to be simply against property or the law. They may not understand the human consequences of the offense — that a person and a community were also harmed by their actions. Meeting with a victim/survivor often helps an offender understand that his or her behavior has a real and direct impact on other people, and on communities.